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Walking with a purpose: the essay in contemporary nonfiction (10657 words)

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Abstract Taking John D’Agata’s and David Shields’s notion of the ‘lyric essay’ as a starting point, this article discusses Anglophone nonfiction infused by what Claire de Obaldia calls ‘the essayistic spirit’. This kind of writing – by authors such as Annie Dillard, Maggie Nelson, Rebecca Solnit, Eula Biss, Edmund de Waal and Philip Hoare - is generically hybrid, associative, poetically inflected, and rooted in both the concreteness of the world and in metaphysical and ontological questioning. It is fragmentary in form, drawing freely on other sources in a way familiar from contemporary art, music sampling and the internet. But it often has a critical relationship to the material it appropriates, reworking the memes and bromides of contemporary media culture and looking askance at the dispersed attention and instant, pseudo-knowledge of the online age. In contrast with the polarised certainties of post-internet public discourse, it is intrinsically unfanatical. It includes elements of refracted, incomplete autobiography in a way that offers an elliptical corrective to our age of oversharing and emotional unrestraint. In an electronically mediated culture, it is drawn to the non-virtual and sensual, demanding a sustained engagement with its own unique attempt to make sense of the real.

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In 1966 the German-British poet Michael Hamburger declared that the essay, having flourished for three centuries, was now a ‘dead genre’, extinguished by the various totalitarian systems of his own century, which had ‘turned walking without a purpose into a crime’. Essay writing, he argued, presumed the existence of ‘a society that not only tolerates individualism but enjoys it – a society leisured and cultivated enough to do without information’. But Hamburger took heart from the way the essayistic impulse could still be intermittently glimpsed in novels, stories and poems. ‘The spirit of essay-writing walks on irresistibly, even over the corpse of the essay ... and no one knows where it will turn up,’ he wrote. ‘Perhaps in the essay, once again?’¹

In their introduction to a 1997 issue of the *Seneca Review*, Deborah Tall and John D’Agata named and defined a new literary genre, the ‘lyric essay’, which seemed to respond belatedly to Hamburger’s call. This form of contemporary nonfiction, they wrote, borrowed from the poem ‘in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language’ and from the essay ‘in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form’.² Elaborating on this definition in 2003, D’Agata argued that ‘lyric essay’ was a deliberate oxymoron. In its pursuit of answers without any expectation of finding them, this form of writing stood for ‘a kind of logic that wants to sing; an argument that has no chance of proving anything’.³ His use of the term arose out of an impatience with existing attempts to rename that perennial poor relation and non-genre, nonfiction. In his introduction to a 2014 anthology, *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay*, D’Agata lamented how desperate the term ‘creative nonfiction’ sounded, but conceded that ‘lyric essay’ was ‘no less an example of lipstick on a pig’.⁴

In his 2010 book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, David Shields gave the term a wider circulation while also raising the stakes. The lyric essay, he wrote, was a form suited to the fluidity and miscellaneousness of contemporary life, unlike most modern novels, which carried on deploying an ‘elaborate, overbuilt stage set’ of narrative conventions which could no longer sate our hunger for reality. For Shields, the most vital new writing dispensed with this obsolete fictional apparatus to explore the more urgent drama of ‘an active human consciousness trying to figure out how he or she has solved or not solved being alive’.⁵ *Reality Hunger*’s thesis was neatly incarnated in its form: 618 numbered sections, ranging in length from short sentences to long paragraphs and all riffing on the nature of contemporary reality and its representation.

The polemical crux of Shields’s manifesto, probably exaggerated for rhetorical effect, unravels under closer scrutiny. From Tolstoy’s dalliance with Schopenhauer in the essay-like epilogue to *War and Peace* to the micro-realism of Karl Ove Knausgaard, novelists have perennially expressed impatience with the unwieldy and evasive mechanics of fiction. Claire de Obaldia argues that the essay has long been a paradigm of ‘literature *in potentia*’, a ‘fourth literary genre’ which has inveigled its way into the main modes of poetry, drama and, especially, fiction – in the work of Proust, Woolf, Mann, Musil, Borges, Kundera and others.⁶ The novel is clearly a more capacious and promiscuous form than Shields allows for. There is scant evidence, either, that we are now more impatient for the double-espresso shots of reality that he craves as a ‘wisdom junkie’.⁷ Fat, narrative-driven novels, by Donna Tartt, Hilary Mantel, Jonathan Franzen, Eleanor Catton, Hanya Yanagihara and others, continue to be read in volume – rather more, in fact, than works that call themselves ‘lyric essays’. And the mainstream nonfiction of blockbuster biographies, misery memoirs, pop philosophy and self-

help, which escapes censure in Shields's book, is just as in thrall to sequential narrative and realist conventions.

And yet Shields and D'Agata are not alone in thinking that much of the most interesting Anglophone nonfiction today has caught what de Obaldia calls 'the essayistic spirit'. For Sven Birkerts the essay has been granted 'a second life in our complex hyper-driven culture', for it 'offers a means of responding to the variegated and fragmented character of contemporary life'.⁸ Brian Dillon, while dismissing the term 'lyric essay' as 'mushy-sounding', suggests that, in its multiform and motley quality, 'the centuries-old form of the essay may well be the genre of the future'.⁹ Sarah Menkedick writes that the lyric essay 'replicates the pre-eminent way of experiencing the world in the digital age ... We live by the fragment: the blurb, the blog, the text, the tweet, the status update, the email, the three-sentence paragraph.'¹⁰ The poet and critic Ian Patterson wonders if the *dériviste*, essayistic style of much contemporary nonfiction, with its 'associative thinking and oblique connections ... reflects habits of thought of which hyperlinking and googling are part'.¹¹

The diverse nonfiction writing I want to examine below is united by this essayistic impulse. It is generically hybrid, discursive, poetically inflected, rooted in both the concreteness of the world and in metaphysical and ontological inquiry. It mixes autobiographical reflection with a peripatetic scholarship that ranges widely through cultural and natural history, science, folklore, philosophy, theology, literary and cultural criticism, human geography and other fields. What is it about contemporary reality that inspires these polymorphic, genre-blending, ambulatory forms of writing? Why has the essay been exhumed from the grave to which Hamburger consigned it too hastily?

Thinking in fragments

Theodor Adorno wrote of the essay that it ‘thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented, and gains unity by moving through fissures, rather than smoothing them over’.¹² A feature of the new essayistic nonfiction is that it renders this fragmentariness peculiarly conspicuous, by arranging itself, in Carl Klaus’s terms, in ‘segmented’ or ‘quilted’ form. Its key structuring device is not the chapter or paragraph but the section break, marked by line spaces and, often, asterisks or other visual markers.¹³ The segmented essay dispenses with chronology and other obvious narrative development and relies instead on evocative juxtaposition, forcing the reader to make little intellectual and emotional leaps across the white space of the page. Its section breaks create a more pregnant pause than a new paragraph but less disruption than a new chapter, allowing for shifts of register within a broadly continuous whole. These breaks let the text move quickly across different discursive realms – between the personal and impersonal, the concrete and the abstract, the anecdotal and the analytical – unimpeded by the need for connective padding.

The lyric essays of the kind that D’Agata has written himself, and those by others such as Anne Carson, Jenny Boully and Wayne Koestenbaum included in his collection, *The Next American Essay* (2003), often feel closer to experimental poetry than prose.¹⁴ Sometimes the material is given a superficial shape by being arranged in numbered sections which, as Shields puts it, ‘gesture toward rationality of order’ while ‘the material empties out any such promise’.¹⁵ Boully’s ‘The Body’ (2002), for example, is made up only of footnotes.¹⁶ Eula Biss’s *The Balloonists* (2002) splices together facts about her parents’ marriage and divorce with italicised sections about flight data recorders, including the things that pilots say when their planes go down, from love declarations to lullabies.¹⁷ Koestenbaum’s *Humiliation* (2011)

is divided into numbered ‘fugues’, each offering a vignette on the book’s theme, from the internet as ‘the highway of humiliation’ to humiliation as ‘the feared and inevitable outcome of most writing’.¹⁸

D’Agata’s other Graywolf Press anthologies, *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009) and *The Making of the American Essay* (2016), place the contemporary lyric essay in the context of a global corpus of non-linear, non-generic writing, much of it composed at the level of the sentence or the fragment, stretching across five millennia. D’Agata’s curation of such writing encompasses the lists of Ziusudra of Sumer, the aphorisms of Heraclitus, Sei Shōnagon’s *Pillow Book* and the work of twentieth-century acategorical writers such as Julio Cortázar, Donald Barthelme, Kamau Brathwaite and Marguerite Duras.¹⁹ A more direct lineage that D’Agata does not trace could be found in the tradition of the literary fragment that emerged with the early Romantic movement in Jena at the end of the eighteenth century. Writers such as Friedrich and August Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Novalis were trying to fuse poetry and philosophical thought as a way of making sense of the creative disorder of modernity. The fragment, wrote Friedrich Schlegel in 1798, is ‘entirely separate from the surrounding world, like a miniature artwork, and complete in itself like a hedgehog’.²⁰ As the fragment became a staple of twentieth-century modernist writing, it sought to convey the lack of a sense of coherence and causality in modern life, its feeling of being lived as a series of fleeting, inchoate moments.²¹

Phillip Lopate has criticised the type of avant-garde lyric essay that D’Agata has championed, with its roots in the modernist fragment, for its drift into ‘opacity, incoherence, preciousity’, its ‘refusal to let thought accrue to some purpose’.²² David Lazar also worries that in the lyric essay ‘ideas and opacity, difficulty and impenetrability, seem to be lines that get routinely

crossed'.²³ It is true that over any extended length it can feel as if some of these pieces, with their dramatic jump cuts and tonal shifts, are shirking the necessary work of arrangement and development. But the nonfiction I want to examine below is not as fragmented, and walks a finer line between opacity and coherence. In these works, the sentence and paragraph are still the main units and the line breaks remain crucial. But the segments are longer and the section breaks thus further apart, and the effect is not as radically disjunctive.

Charles Rosen has suggested that the Schlegelian idea of the romantic fragment was refined in the idea of the song cycle, which 'most clearly embodies the Romantic conception of experience as a gradual unfolding and illumination of reality in the place of Classical insistence on an initial clarity'.²⁴ For Roland Barthes, too, the literary fragment is 'like the musical idea of a song cycle ... each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbors'.²⁵ Much essayistic contemporary nonfiction is like this: a song cycle rather than a series of Schlegelian hedgehogs. Even its most seemingly standalone fragments are rarely cul-de-sacs, but give at least the gist of a gradually focusing theme or evolving argument. It retains a loose narrative spine, in the form of a knowledge quest, a convoluted journey or a partial memoir. The interspacing between the segments delays, but does not preclude, the delivery of meaning and significance. It allows the prose to change course and then circle round to examine the same problem in a different light a few pages later. This kind of writing wants to convey the amorphous, attention-dispersing qualities of contemporary life, but within an overall sense of pattern, unity and momentum.

A key figure here is Annie Dillard, who has been producing work like this since the early 1970s. Her writing strives to be, to use a phrase she borrows from Thoreau to describe her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), a 'meteorological journal of the mind'.²⁶ In her

meditation on the human condition, *For the Time Being* (1999), she relies on the abrupt transition or verbal shimmy, often achieved through an unexpected question ('Why do we concern ourselves over which side of the membrane of soil our feet poke?') or a sentence swerving off into surprising places: 'We are one of those animals, the ones whose neocortexes swelled, who just happen to write encyclopedias and fly to the moon.'²⁷ Dillard does not use the term 'lyric essay', but she has suggested that, historically and throughout the world, lyric poetry has been 'less fanciful' than fiction, being often 'a collation of interpreted facts' that functions 'quite directly as human interpretation of the raw, loose universe'.²⁸ Shields argues similarly that the poem and the essay have in common this attempt to pursue and solve existential problems, to bring together an encounter with the real world with an exploration of its meaning.²⁹

Dillard's prose is more designed and thought-out than its discontinuous form suggests. In *Living By Fiction* (1982), an apologia for the kind of segmented narrative she writes, she argues that the work of art may 'pretend to any degree of spontaneity, randomness, or whimsy' but the whole must seem 'calculated and unified'.³⁰ In *For the Time Being*, she forms her meditation around recurring but porous subheadings such as 'Birth', 'Sand', 'Clouds' and 'Now'. Different thematic strands – the French palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's explorations in the Gobi desert; the natural history of sand, wave foam and clouds and human attempts to classify them; the arbitrary cruelty of human birth defects; the deaths of nameless millions in floods, earthquakes and genocides – seem at first to be unassimilated. But as the book proceeds they all feed into a classic Dillardian problem: how little an individual life counts for in the context of billions of other lives and the sheer scale and age of the universe.

A swath of current nonfiction authors – Geoff Dyer, Kathleen Jamie, Jonathan Lethem and Robert Macfarlane among many others – has claimed Dillard’s daring juxtapositions and concentrated lyricism as a model. When Dillard taught Maggie Nelson creative writing at Wesleyan University in the early 1990s, she crucially advised her to ‘write a lot of short things and put them together’.³¹ Nelson took the title of her poetry collection *Something Bright, Then Holes* (2007) from a line in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and dedicated her book *The Art of Cruelty* (2011) to Dillard. Nelson’s work reads at first as still more shapeless than her mentor’s, her gaps of white space arriving virtually every paragraph, with some of the paragraphs as short as a sentence. She has, though, inherited Dillard’s habit of giving special weight to sentences placed at the beginning of these short sections (‘Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a colour ... And so I fell in love with a colour ... Well, and what of it?’) and the end of them, where they are often placed in italics (‘*I will try to explain this ... This ought to arouse our suspicions.*’)³² These soft beginnings and endings give the prose an impetus and rhythm, offsetting the interruption of the section break.

Nelson’s *Bluets* (2009) is a seemingly formless reverie, in 240 numbered sections, of different ideas of blue – as pertaining to sex, as the blue-black of depression, and as a colour which intrudes poetically into mundane life, from a blue poison strip for termites she spies on the floor to ‘the bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty and fish stand in the world’.³³ But Nelson’s authorial tone creates a sense of unity. The thoughts that make up the book, she writes, have been ‘shuffled around countless times’ and ‘made to appear, at long last, running forward as one river’. It transpires that the book, much of which is addressed to a yearned-for second person, is all about heartbreak and longing, and that the love of blue is a substitute for human connection. It ends with an address to this ex-lover: ‘I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world.’³⁴

In *The Argonauts* (2015) Nelson criticises fiction, in Shieldsian vein, for ‘purport[ing] to provide occasions for thinking through complex issues’ when in fact it has ‘stuffed a narrative full of false choices and hooked you on them’. Here she tells the story of her relationship with her genderfluid partner Harry Dodge using gaps and elisions, conveying the oddness of its motion, as in the section that begins ‘And then, just like that, I was folding your son’s laundry.’³⁵ The book loops back and forth in time but within an advancing narrative in which Nelson and Dodge get married, Nelson becomes pregnant with donor sperm and she gives birth to her son, Iggy, although only in the final pages do we learn how Rebecca Priscilla Bard became Harry Dodge. The book’s title comes from a fragment in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* which claims that the phrase ‘I love you’ has to be continually restated, just as all the planks that made up the Argo were replaced over time so it was an entirely different ship under the same name.³⁶ *The Argonauts* turns out to be subtly shaped by Nelson’s efforts to explore the allure and compromises of a ‘normal’ life (marriage, children) while working through her own conflicted feelings of love and desire.

The literary mosaic

An essay is typically some sort of conversation between the author and other people’s writing and thinking. The lyric essay makes this conversation integral to its form. In *The Argonauts* Nelson quotes many writers and theorists – D.W. Winnicott, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan – but, instead of referencing them formally, she simply inserts their surnames in the margin next to the quote. In this manoeuvre, borrowed from Barthes, the reader’s gaze flits between body text and marginalia more readily than with a footnote. It hints at a more animated connection between Nelson’s ideas and those of others than formal citation permits.

Her decision to italicise the quotations, rather than to enclose them in quote marks, suggests a similarly intimate engagement. Nelson has said in interviews that ‘there’s an art to attribution, it’s not all scrupulous drudgery’.³⁷ She is looking, she says, for ‘a thoroughly digested way of thinking with other people’ and sees citation as ‘a form of family-making’.³⁸

Shields’s *Reality Hunger* extends this essayistic sense of an organic relationship with its sources into more combative territory. Many of the book’s sentences are taken verbatim from other authors – cited grudgingly at the end, at the insistence of the Random House lawyers, along with a defiant note stating that ‘your uncertainty about whose words you’ve just read is not a bug but a feature’.³⁹ The traditional essay relies on a strong sense of the thinking self of the author, the grain and texture of a uniquely individual mind, to hold together its unruly mix of anecdote, description and argument. But Shields argues that in the digital age the chaotic inclusiveness of the essay needs to be wedded to a new idea of authorship. In a sense he is imagining a return to the essay’s roots in what de Olbadia calls ‘the literature of compilation’ – such as the collections of *sententiae*, *florilegia* and *exempla* published from antiquity to the early modern era.⁴⁰ Michel de Montaigne’s earliest essays, written before he had fully developed his distinctively companionable literary voice, rely heavily on quotation from his favourite writers, and betray the origins of the essay form in these earlier compendia around a given topic.⁴¹

Shields is not the only contemporary essayist to claim, in this seemingly self-sabotaging way, that the digital era is making lone authorship obsolete. Jonathan Lethem’s 2007 essay ‘The Ecstasy of Influence’ explicitly confronts Harold Bloom’s argument, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, that true artists can only be born through cultivating a Freudian *agon* against their influences. Using many examples – Bob Dylan’s creative borrowings from folk, Delta blues

and civil war poetry, the ‘open source’ culture of jazz musicians, and William Burroughs’s cut-ups, which ‘interrogat[e] the universe with scissors and a pastepot’ – Lethem argues that all creative work is inventively derivative. He appends notes to the essay which reveal that much of it is made up of other people’s sentences. The giveaway is its subtitle, ‘a plagiarism’.⁴²

As both Shields and Lethem point out, this is a more familiar concept in art and music than in literature. The French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud identifies a contemporary art practice he alternately names ‘relational aesthetics’ and ‘postproduction’, which creatively reuses artworks and other cultural products. To the DJ who copies and pastes together bits of sound, or the web surfer who invents paths through the dizzying abundance of internet data, notions of ‘originality’ make little sense. The author, according to Bourriaud, is now a mere ‘legal entity’ in an emerging ‘communism of forms’.⁴³ Marcus Boon, a former DJ of warehouse parties, also writes ‘in praise of copying’ as a basic human urge to which new technology has responded, from ‘the DJ as curator, selector, and sequencer of a vast historical and geographical archive’ to the internet as ‘a limitless virtual space of assemblages governed by the logic of the click and the hypertextual trace’.⁴⁴

Shields argues that his own practice of ‘literary mosaic’ is simply catching up with these other art practices: the tradition of collage, which he calls ‘the most important innovation in the art of the twentieth century’⁴⁵; the appropriative music that emerged at the end of the last century, such as sampling, dub reggae and mash-ups; and the democratising of authorship on the post-millennial internet, with its blogging platforms and interactive sites such as Wikipedia, YouTube and Twitter. For Shields, literary fiction is a nineteenth-century relic being overtaken by these ‘more technologically sophisticated and thus more visceral forms’.⁴⁶

The American experimental poet Kenneth Goldsmith likewise complains that ‘most writing proceeds as if the Internet had never happened’. Literature should have been transformed, he writes, by the data harvesting that cutting and pasting from the web makes possible. Instead, it remains consumed with questions of sourcing and veracity that seem hopelessly retrograde in the worlds of art, music, computing and science.⁴⁷

These claims about the inevitable rise of derivative art in the digital age are, in my view, inflated. They restate the common fallacy, outlined by David Edgerton in his book *The Shock of the Old*, of an ‘innovation-centric’ understanding of historical progress.⁴⁸ This fallacy assumes that technological change happens inexorably and in one direction, so older forms like dead-tree literature are seen as lagging behind newer, more virtual media – when in fact these older technologies tend to be fairly resilient and can co-exist creatively with new ones. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid have given the name ‘endism’ to this flawed logic that new technologies like the internet will simply do away with older ones, like real-time television or printed books.⁴⁹

Other critics, such as David Balzer and Hal Foster, have questioned whether the fashionable cultural mode of ‘curationism’ – which empowers us to become curators of our own ‘content’, in music, books, television and other areas – is as free and open as it seems.⁵⁰ Sites like Spotify and Facebook, for instance, use the algorithms of data mining to court particular demographics and sell products to them. As Foster writes, this model ‘suits a postindustrial economy in which our main task, when it is not to serve, is to consume ... As “cognitive labourers”, we manipulate information, which is to say we curate the given, and this compiling often presumes a good amount of compliance.’⁵¹ Digital technologies and the internet have certainly enabled many cooperative initiatives and online gift communities. But

the culture industries remain as powerful as ever: note the many lawsuits over stolen lyrics and music riffs, for instance, or the importance of the celebrity name in the high-end art market.

The zeal with which Shields and D'Agata have championed collagist work is itself a sign of the survival and resilience of what they are critiquing: the notion of a single, copyright-protected author with an authoritative mastery of sources and facts. D'Agata's *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), co-authored with Jim Fingal, is based on their seven-year email correspondence about a single magazine piece by D'Agata, which Fingal was assigned to fact-check for *The Believer*. The book is a long, probably embellished argument between the two men in which D'Agata argues that, in 'the world of essay-as-literature as opposed to essay-as-explanation', he should be free to clean up quotes, change statistics and alter descriptions of the physical world.⁵² These arguments come out of an American journalistic context in which great store is placed on verification and citation – a legacy of the fact-checking culture that emerged at the *New Yorker* and *Time* magazines from the 1920s onwards. US magazine journalists still often have to turn over their notes and references, including transcripts and audio tapes, to their editors. This quasi-academic puritanism helps to explain the career-ruining public disgrace suffered by authors who doctor quotations, recycle their own work or write a 'memoir' that is discovered to be heavily fictionalised. (See, for example, the fates of James Frey, J.T. Leroy [aka Laura Albert], Margaret Seltzer and Jonah Lehrer.)

Within this context, where old authorial models endure, Shields imagines the rise of 'user-made content' – under which he groups together a huge range of phenomena such as karaoke, graffiti art, the Guitar Hero and Rock Band video games and the Facebook update as 'crude

personal essay machine' – as an unalloyed good, a 'new folk art'.⁵³ And yet some of the most effective lyric essays in this collagist/found mode do not simply accede to the digital age's flattening of information, its conflation of words into interchangeable, cut-and-pastable content. They still rely crucially on the navigating and often satirical intelligence of the author. In Shields's own work, for instance, there is a consistency of tone and doggedness of argument which belies its origins as patchwriting stitched together from multiple sources. In *Remote* (1996), a series of reflections on autobiography and celebrity, he refracts his life through the reassembled platitudes of contemporary culture. The chapter, 'Life Story', for example, gives us a life told simply through listing the forced humour one finds on bumper stickers and office notices: 'You're only young once, but you can be immature forever. I may grow old, but I'll never grow up. Too fast to love, too young to die.' In 'Always', he weaves together a collection of media clichés to expose the randomness of our cultural norms: 'Presented with the mildest of coincidences, the sportscaster always insists upon seeing poetic justice or delicious irony ... In movies, suburbanites and yuppies always drive Volvos and always wind up learning that life involves compromise, pain, and loss.'⁵⁴

Today's lyric essayists do not just collate and curate content. They rework the memes and bromides of contemporary media culture, and offer a mordant commentary on what Janet H. Murray, as long ago as 1997, called the 'global autobiography project' of the internet.⁵⁵ The poet Don Paterson's prose works *The Book of Shadows* (2005) and *The Blind Eye* (2007) deal acerbically with the distracting trivia which interrupts our daily lives ('No email for an hour. The bastards'), the perils of ego surfing, and the banal self-absorption of new forms of writing: 'You've made a blog ... Clever boy! Next: flushing.'⁵⁶ These works are made up of aphorisms which convey a real ambivalence about the form, related as it is to 'that steady source of comforting inanity, the text-message' and other forms of 'data-overload' that have

‘reduced our powers of sustained concentration to that of a lovesick guppy’.⁵⁷ Aphorism, for Paterson, is poetry’s ‘talentless, tone-deaf brother’.⁵⁸

A certain sort of collagist lyric essay can make its point all the more effectively by presenting cant without any comment but with a sort of anonymous astringency. Eliot Weinberger’s *What I Heard About Iraq* (2005) is a simple montage of overheard statements, facts and soundbites which details the lies and evasions of politicians over a four-year period from just before 9/11 to after the Iraq War. With each line often beginning ‘I heard Donald Rumsfeld say’ or ‘I heard Tony Blair say’, it shows how political ‘truths’ can be spread through mere incantation and then flatly contradicted.⁵⁹ Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004) looks similarly askance at the dispersed attention and pseudo-knowledge of the internet age. A contemplation on American life from the late 1990s through to the Iraq war, this book is formed from fragments which show how one narrative ‘I’ experiences this transitional historical moment by flipping TV channels and surfing the web. These textual fragments are interspersed with photographs of, for instance, the labels on bottles of antidepressants, piles of wooden stretchers near Grand Zero, and an animation passed on via email with an accompanying song (‘Come Mister Taliban give us bin Laden’) which turns into an earworm she cannot stop singing.⁶⁰ In the face of this cacophony of narratives designed to persuade, coerce or gain market share, Rankine shows how hard it is for one person to make modern life cohere.

Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) uses a similarly fragmented narrative to explore how toxic racial attitudes grow in the spaces between everyday routine and media-stoked fear. Rankine looks for allusive connections that we might miss in the hurry and blur of an endlessly mediatised daily life. Her book opens with a brief let-up from the omnipresent

pinging phones and tablets that both feed our neuroses and protect us from self-scrutiny:

‘When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows.’ It then segues into a miscellany of accounts of invisible racism, all endured by a second-person ‘you’ who may or may not be Rankine, such as the ‘you’ whom a friend calls by the name of her black housekeeper, or the ‘you’ who is asked by a friend why she looks so angry in photographs.⁶¹

Forcing the reader to inhabit this ‘you’, Rankine blurs the distinction between what she calls the ‘self self’, which allows you to ‘interact as friends with mutual interests and for the most part, compatible personalities’, and the ‘historical self’, which divides you brutally by colour.⁶² These silently borne slights segue, with no explanatory transitions, into events of national moment, such as the US government’s non-response to Hurricane Katrina and the deaths of unarmed black men in police custody. By shifting gears so sharply, *Citizen* refuses its readers the comforting sense that it is about a discrete life separate from their own, and forces them to examine their complicity in other people’s stories. At the same time, and even though it is written in the second person and draws on hundreds of separate narratives, the book manages to maintain a singular voice and, indeed, a slow-burning anger.

The lyric self, as Marjorie Perloff writes in *Unoriginal Genius*, is fashioned in our information age by just this sense of a ‘complex process of negotiation between private feeling and public evidence’. The lyric ‘I’ learns that she is ‘a link – an unwitting one, perhaps – in a cultural matrix’.⁶³ The lyric essay may have moved away from the post-Romantic idea of the lyric as the personal utterance of interiorised feeling, and from the traditional essay’s notion of the natural flow of an idiosyncratic mind forming a seamless tapestry of association. But even when it seems in danger of dispensing with the self in a

mass of quotations, it somehow retains the essayistic idea of a single, searching consciousness, shaping the material through its unique tonal signature. That thinking self is on an unmapped journey, making its confused way through postmodern culture.

Against truthiness

In her book *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language* Judith Allen argues that the essay form is especially adept at addressing the impoverished, corrupted public discourse of Woolf's time and ours. Woolf's essays, she notes, segue between lyrical cerebration and the critique of clichéd language and thought; they show that words can be both a tool for critical thought and an obstacle to it. Allen focuses especially on *Three Guineas* (1938), in which Woolf attacks those 'prostituted fact-purveyors' of the press, with their 'old words' like 'freedom', 'patriotism' and 'intellectual liberty', and invites women to form a 'Society of Outsiders' which will be able to resist this 'adultery of the brain'.⁶⁴ For Allen, Woolf's essayistic spirit is newly germane in a contemporary culture infected by 'the extreme difficulty of trying to ascertain the sources of this "information", the validity, the reliability, the inherent bias of what has now become an instantaneous onslaught of words, parts of words, photos and videos'.⁶⁵

One aspect of the online age that might shock even the Virginia Woolf who wrote *Three Guineas* is the stridency and feverishness of its public conversations: the calculatingly contentious op-ed pieces written as 'clickbait', the suffocating earnestness and pointless anger of below-the-line comments, the public shaming exercises unleashed by Twitterstorms. We live in an era of endlessly accessible information – of facts, or at least factoids, available at the click of a mouse – but also of 'truthiness', a word the American TV satirist Stephen

Colbert coined in 2005 in response to George W. Bush's justification of decisions through simple assertion.⁶⁶ 'Truthiness' is a truth the speaker claims to know intuitively and emotionally regardless of evidence. The tone of debates conducted online, for instance, is highly emotive and entrenched. Discussion tends to be stripped of nuance and seen merely as denuded argument, reduced to its 'takeaway' lesson or its 'takedown' of someone else.

In contrast with the polarised certainties of post-internet public discourse, essayistic nonfiction is intrinsically unfanatical. 'How to explain,' as Nelson puts it in *The Argonauts*, 'in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?'⁶⁷ The essay form is open-ended and provisional, conveying a mind in process, what Elizabeth Hardwick describes as 'thought itself in orbit'.⁶⁸ It can take an emotionally freighted topic and worry away at it, holding it up and turning it around slowly in the light. It forms an argument only in the course of putting it into words – a reminder that the roots of the word 'essay' lie in the Latin *exagium*, meaning the 'weighing' of an object or idea.⁶⁹ Eula Biss's book-length essay *On Immunity* (2015) is meant to be an 'inoculation', as its subtitle suggests, against the heated language and *ad hominem* arguments of social and mainstream media. This sort of abstract-noun subtitle is intriguingly common in contemporary nonfiction: see, for instance, Lethem's 'The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism', or Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder* (2005) and *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. The subtitle implies that the book will not be articulating a pre-assembled argument so much as slowly encircling and exploring a mood or condition. Biss suggests in the discursive endnotes to *On Immunity* that the essayist should be both 'self-appointed outcast' and 'citizen thinker'.⁷⁰ The trick, she suggests, is to combine personal commitment with critical detachment and let both of these impulses usefully inform the other.

On Immunity begins with the myth of Achilles, whose mother dipped him in the River Styx only to leave the vulnerable spot on his heel where she had held him. Biss remarks that she found the moral – that ‘immunity is a myth ... and no mortal can ever be made invulnerable’⁷¹ – easier to grasp before she became a parent, especially when, shortly after the birth of her son in 2009, the ‘swine flu’ epidemic broke out. Biss moves slowly but inevitably towards an argument in favour of mass inoculation and towards a final sentence which concludes that ‘immunity is a shared space – a garden we tend together’.⁷² But she can also see what makes the medical idea of ‘herd immunity’ so uninviting. An educated, left-of-centre woman mistrustful of the media, government and big pharma and drawn to doing things ‘naturally’, Biss admits that the first time her son drank anything other than her breast milk she agonised over the idea of impurities entering his body. She acknowledges the influence of Susan Sontag’s classic essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) – written, Sontag wrote later, to ‘calm the imagination, not to incite it’.⁷³ But while Sontag coolly dismantled the cultural myths that surrounded her own experience of cancer, Biss recognises that metaphor is simply what we use to find meaning in the world, and that critical detachment is not so easily won.

Biss’s father is a doctor and her mother a poet, and the clinical/rational and lyrical/emotional play off each other in *On Immunity*. Having carefully accumulated its evidence, the book ends with a call for scientists and everyone else to dwell in a Keatsian ‘negative capability’.⁷⁴ Biss’s larger theme, underlying the book’s narrower focus on inoculation, is how hard it is for even the sanest and most clear-eyed to let go of their emotional investments, and how reluctantly we are dragged into self-knowledge. *On Immunity* leaves us, as Vivian Gornick writes of this kind of essayistic nonfiction narrative, with a sense of a self-divided mind ‘puzzling its way out of its own shadows’.⁷⁵

Essayistic nonfiction is structured, as the essay has been since Montaigne, around the line traced by individual curiosity – ‘a journey of a thought into risk’ and ‘a mind’s inquisitive ramble through a place wiped clean of answers’, in D’Agata’s words.⁷⁶ Its vehicle is a single subject in which the author has both a deep personal stake and an eclectically scholarly interest. The narrative picks up different strands of fugitive knowledge in pursuit of this subject and a whole range of themes comes to seem pertinent to it. The American writer Ander Monson compares this form, weirdly but insightfully, to the Playstation 2 game *Katamari Damacy*, in which a prince rolls a magic, adhesive ball around, collecting ever larger objects with it, until the ball has grown large enough to make up the moon and stars. ‘If the essay is a ball,’ Monson writes, ‘the lyric essay is a super sticky power ball.’⁷⁷

In the book-length lyric essay, an actual journey often provides the narrative vertebrae for this circuitous gathering up of knowledge. Daniel Swift’s *Bomber County* (2010), for instance, goes in search of his grandfather, a squadron leader killed in action during a bombing raid on Münster in 1943. Swift visits the beach in Holland where his grandfather’s body washed up, meets RAF veterans, enters a Lancaster’s cockpit, reads his grandfather’s letters, and pores through archives in the Imperial War Museum to recreate as much detail as he can about his unaccounted-for last hours on the fatal mission. In the process his grandfather both comes into sharper focus and recedes from view, as Swift loses a sense of the singularity of his death amid tens of thousands of similar stories. Beginning the book with the belief that ‘archives are cathedrals, holy houses where may be answered even the hardest human loss’, he comes round instead to the idea that ‘the end of the archive is the beginning of poetry’.⁷⁸ His grandfather’s story is merely the lens through which to view the firebombing of cities as an unspoken and unspeakable subject in the literary and historical imagination. What feels at the

book's start as if it will be a conventional story of discovery and recuperation turns into a different type of journey: an essay.

So many recent works of nonfiction deploy this device of a physical journey mirroring an intellectual one in pursuit of the ultimately unknowable. Philip Hoare's *Leviathan: Or, The Whale* (2008) follows in the footsteps of Ishmael in *Moby Dick* and ends with an underwater encounter with sperm whales in the Azores. But the journey serves mainly as the impetus for a freeflowing essay on the life of whales, which exposes vast gaps in our knowledge of how they migrate, hunt, mate and communicate. The closer Hoare gets to them, the further away they seem, 'so separated in scale in our microcosms of greater unknowns, from the sea to infinity'.⁷⁹ In Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010), the journey made by 264 *netsuke* – small Japanese ivory or wood carvings which came circuitously into de Waal's possession after his rich ancestors, the Ephrussis, had their estate grabbed by the Nazis – feels at first as if it will inspire the sort of family archive history popularised by the BBC TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?*. But de Waal soon distances himself from what he calls 'the sepia saga business'.⁸⁰ His travels around Europe poring over old photographs, letters and street maps are really just a holding vessel for a long essay on Jewishness, exile, memory and the thin veneer of civilisation which holds the capacity for human cruelty at bay.

Essayistic nonfiction tends to set itself these methodological challenges and expose the difficulties of its own research and writing – as if to suggest that not every fact or thing worth knowing can be found via Google, and that real intellectual and emotional insight entails hard thinking and sustained curiosity. The lyricism of such writing arises partly from a sense that the truth cannot be known definitively and so must be approached poetically. In *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life* (2015), William Finnegan writes intricately about the marine science of

how rideable waves form and break, the colour and texture of surf, and ‘the physics of flotation and glide’. But his subject also resists being put into words. Surfing has little obvious narrative impulse, for despite the surfers’ obsession with the ‘perfect wave’, they are essentially doing the same thing over and over again. The waves do not so much ‘beggar’ as ‘scramble’ language, as Finnegan puts it, in their combination of awesomeness and impermanence. Much of the anthropology of surfing, from the ‘simian dance of dominance/submission’ that organises the turn-taking at the point break to the taciturn male friendships it nurtures, is never spoken about. Surfers also undersell the excitement and beauty of their trade, relying on non-verbal grunts and cryptic slang, chary of over-explanation. Finnegan’s writing feeds off the same wariness. When identifying the surfing ideals of ‘casual power’, ‘grace under pressure’ and the ability always to ‘act like you’ve been there before’, he could be describing his own highly controlled, undersold lyricism.⁸¹

The essay as anti-confession

Within the limits imposed by its segmented form, essayistic nonfiction will often narrate a refracted, partial autobiography. The essay form is always partly autobiographical anyway, because its disparate material relies on a distinctive authorial voice to make it coalesce. As Graham Good writes, ‘The mixture of elements in the essay – the unsorted “wholeness” of experience it represents – can only be held together by the concept of self.’⁸² And yet this unsorted mixture of elements also puts paid to the notion of biographical completion. Since an essay is generally written ‘on’ something, this theme can serve as the vehicle through which the personal is both inserted and evaded. The subtitle of *Barbarian Days* is the precisely apt ‘a surfing life’. Finnegan alludes offhandedly to his non-surfing life, such as the racial tensions in his Hawaiian school, his political activism or the birth of his daughter. He

touches on themes such as masculinity and male friendship, the struggle to become a responsible citizen against the attractions of a ‘barbarian’ life, and the surf as both a place of retreat from the world and an unforgiving wilderness. But the book is *really* about surfing, and all these experiences and conflicts are deflected through it.

This type of deflected memoir – autobiography disguised as essay, and vice versa – has become almost the default mode of non-academic cultural and social criticism. In Leanne Shapton’s *Swimming Studies* (2012), an account of her life as a teenage Olympic swimming triallist for Canada, the resulting fluidity of tone and structure neatly echoes the book’s subject matter. It builds its insights in slow increments, using the rhythms of training laps to disturb the pattern of a linear life, drifting through half-finished thoughts and stray reflections, just as the mind does when the body is occupied with repetitive movements and the view through one’s goggles is foggy and dull. This ‘slide show of shuffling thoughts’,⁸³ as Shapton puts it, includes memories of unrelenting muscle pain, the smell of over-chlorinated pools and the way that water responds to a human presence. The narrative hints at Shapton’s wilful personality and how it might have fed into her life as a writer and artist, with the lonely obsessions of competitive swimming clearly akin to the necessary monomania of writing or painting. But her intervallic prose eschews the most obvious linkages, refusing to flesh out details or move forward, offering only a hypnotic account of countless hours submerged in water.

This kind of text, with its convolutedly personal subject matter, has a curious relationship with what Deborah Cohen calls the ‘modern age of confession’.⁸⁴ According to Cohen, this age emerged from the 1930s onwards as attitudes began to change towards divorce, illegitimacy, homosexuality, infidelity, mental disability and other aspects of life that were

once kept as shameful secrets. Psychotherapy, too, normalised the idea that self-narration was an essential element of a well-lived life. Accessibility and transparency came to be seen as the keys to both psychological well-being and a healthy public life. The sociologist Eva Illouz argues that, more recently, the neoliberal emphasis on the free flow of markets and information has made us ‘Rousseauian with a vengeance’, transforming the public sphere into ‘an arena for the exposition of private life’.⁸⁵ The rise of social networking and the smartphone has made it normal for people to lay bare their personal lives (which also conveniently links their identities to their purchase histories and makes them easier to target by advertisers). Out of this alliance of market logic and technological change has emerged a new ethos of personal visibility and emotional candour.

Paradoxically, the essay’s tradition of self-inquiry militates against what Fred Inglis calls ‘confessionality’, this contemporary mode which ‘supposes to itself that by pouring out of one’s heart one’s bitter resentments and disappointments, one will be cleansed of life’s poison and feel better’.⁸⁶ For an essay never simply emotes: its form demands that personal testimony be supplemented by analysis of those experiences. Its starting position, as Phillip Lopate has it, is that ‘emotion and thinking are not mutually exclusive but can coexist: passionately argued thought can have affective warmth, just as feelings can be thoughtfully and delicately parsed’.⁸⁷ The segmented nature of essayistic nonfiction allows it especially to mine this seam between raw experience and considered reflection. It can interrupt personal revelation with more contextual or ruminative passages, before returning to the personal in a slightly different place. The breaks act like privacy settings, leaving bits of autobiography hanging in the air – an elliptical corrective to our age of oversharing and emotional unrestraint.

The wandering line of thought in the essay-cum-memoir worries away at what can be known about a self by abandoning the chronological coherence of an orthodox life story. The British edition of Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* (2013) was tellingly categorised on its back cover, at the author's request, as 'memoir/anti-memoir'. Solnit stitches a highly personal account of her troubled relationship with her mother, who is now suffering from Alzheimer's, into a broader patchwork of stories, from fairy tales to Inuit legends. The book's unusual structure underscores its argument that the 'tidy containment' of the sovereign self is an illusion, and that our identities are constructed through our encounters with other people's lives and a shared human heritage.⁸⁸ Chapters one and thirteen are both called 'Apricots', two and twelve 'Mirrors', three and eleven 'Ice', and so on, with an additional chapter printed in a single line along the bottom of every page. This paralleling arrangement scotches any expectation that this will be a conventionally developmental memoir of illness and healing, with a movement out of suffering and turmoil into order and redemption. One of the book's key concerns is 'empathy', that contemporary incantation meant to solve so many social ills. But its bracingly off-message conclusion is that we barely know ourselves, let alone others, because the stories we tell can just as easily induce self-delusion as understanding. Stories are both 'the bridges we build between the island republics of ourselves' and 'the quicksand in which we thrash and the well in which we drown'.⁸⁹

The layered segments of the lyric essay can also lend themselves to what Solnit calls 'anti-memoir' in the way that they suggestively interleave the author's own life with that of others, without forcing the connections. Vivian Gornick's *The Odd Woman and the City* (2015), for example, proceeds in short, impressionistic sections which let her write about her life as just one New York loner among many. Dispensing with the creation myth of the world's capital as a place to arrive in and be anointed by success, Gornick alights instead on the New York in

which no one is going anywhere and we are ‘the eternal groundlings who wander these mean and marvellous streets in search of a self reflected back in the eye of the stranger’. The story of her own ‘unlived life’ – non-chronological, mixed-up memories from growing up in the Bronx to 9/11 – is interspersed with sections that describe her brief, equivocally life-affirming encounters in the streets with ‘the contingent other’. These ‘others’ include everyone from commuters and office workers to addicts and homeless people, whom she sees laughing, crying, quarrelling or simply shouting into the air.⁹⁰ The book’s composite form as a series of these moments is an answer to ‘the children of the therapeutic culture’, including herself, who suffer from ‘the great illusion of our culture that what we confess to is who we are’. We become truly human, Gornick suggests, only by joining in with ‘this flood of human partialness’.⁹¹

As Lopate points out, the essay, from Montaigne onwards, has traditionally assumed an essential human commonality in even the most private experience.⁹² This makes it the ideal form through which to study this paradox of contemporary life, that in the age of social networks and privatised consumerism we are simultaneously more isolated and more connected to absent others. In Olivia Laing’s essay-memoir *The Lonely City* (2016), set like Gornick’s in New York, modern urban life is shown to be full of these tenuous links that avoid the risks and compromises of real intimacy and connection. Laing’s hard-won discovery is that her own loneliness is a common state. Loneliness, she realises, is a solipsistic condition mutually shared, what she calls ‘a populated place: a city in itself’.⁹³ This is what essayistic writing, with its mingling of the personal and the general, can so deftly reveal: those aspects of modern life that alienate us from each other are also what we have in common.

Conclusion

Geoff Dyer has complained that much mainstream nonfiction is reducible to a single snappy thesis that can be summed up by reviewers and the public ‘without the tedious obligation of reading the whole book’. He cites the work of Malcolm Gladwell, whose books have sparked many imitators and which have titles - *Blink*, *The Tipping Point*, *Outliers*, *David and Goliath* – that neatly capture their central idea. Such books, Dyer complains, seem like expanded versions of ‘skilfully managed proposals ... which then get boiled back down again with the sale of serial rights’. The nonfiction I have been examining here cannot be distilled or separated from itself in this way. Its essayistic fusion of memoir, reflection, narrative and argument can only be made sense of by immersing oneself in it. In this sort of work, as Dyer puts it, ‘the only way to experience the book is to read it’.⁹⁴

In his recent *Theory of the Lyric* Jonathan Culler makes the similar point that lyric is about enactment; it is ‘not the fictional representation of an experience or an event so much as an attempt to be itself an event’. Moving away from the ‘prosaic, novelizing’ reading of lyric that he sees as a symptom of the novel’s long supremacy in literary criticism and theory, Culler stresses that lyric is not containable within conventional modes of mimesis. Instead it is ‘a place where enchantment and disenchantment, opacity and lucidity are negotiated’.⁹⁵ The same might be said of these forms of nonfiction that bring the lyric and essay together: their ideas and arguments are inseparable from their expression, so they must be understood in the act of reading rather than reduced to précis or paraphrase.

One could read the fragmentariness of essayistic nonfiction, as some of the critics mentioned at the start of this article do, as an echo of the fragmented way we now access and reuse

language and information, whether it is by making serendipitous linkages with the aid of search engines or by moving blocks of text around on a screen. But it makes more sense to me to see this kind of writing as less a reflection of the fragmented nature of modern life than an antidote to it. The line breaks of essayistic nonfiction may bear a superficial resemblance to the web page, on which there is an equally high ratio of white space to text (because it is harder to keep your place when reading on a laptop or phone, so block paragraphs have largely replaced the first-line-indented paragraph online). But the digressions and shifts of essayistic nonfiction are not designed with the skipping and scanning of the web in mind. Instead, and in place of soundbites and second-hand experiences, they demand a sustained engagement with the text's own unique attempt to make sense of the real.

In fact it is striking how much, in an increasingly electronically mediated culture, essayistic nonfiction is drawn to the non-virtual and sensual. Its focus might be an intense feeling, such as a parent's bottomless pit of anxiety (Biss), the subtle humiliation of a racist micro-aggression (Rankine) or the exhilaration felt in a New York street (Gornick). Or it might be something more directly tangible: the technical problems Finnegan faces when attempting to stand up on a short board in surf; Shapton's 'knowledge of water space ... an animal empathy for contact with an element'⁹⁶; the cloud of reddish whale poo and sloughed-off skin that Hoare sees and feels in his close encounter with a sperm whale;⁹⁷ or the hard smoothness of a *netsuke* as de Waal rolls it between his fingers, marvelling at its artistry, down to the tiny signature of the maker on the sole of a sandal or the end of a branch.⁹⁸

Essayistic nonfiction tries to marry this interest in the real with the essay's traditional interest in the speculative and non-definitive. It relies, as the essay form has always done, on the merging of thought and style, using writing as a way of both encountering the world and

thinking about it. But this is far from being what Hamburger called a ‘walking without purpose’. The revival of the essay in contemporary nonfiction has nothing dilettantish or belletristic about it. Its lyricism is neither precious nor opaque but is in careful pursuit of an osmotically acquired, deeply layered knowledge of some detailed aspect of the lived world. Despite its flirtation with postmodern indeterminacy, this kind of nonfiction writing has not given up on reality. It wants to find, in a distracted, simulated age, the things that prove we are alive and that make us human. And it thinks that scrupulous, contemplative, poetic prose, within what Barthes calls this ‘ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing’,⁹⁹ is the best hope of finding it. Like Virginia Woolf reassuring her readers in 1922, it says: ‘But the essay is alive; there is no reason to despair.’¹⁰⁰

Notes

¹ Michael Hamburger, ‘An Essay on the Essay’, in *Art as Second Nature: Occasional Pieces* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1975), pp. 3, 5.

² John D’Agata and Deborah Tall, ‘New Terrain: The Lyric Essay’, *Seneca Review*, 27, 2 (Fall 1997), p. 7.

³ John D’Agata, ‘2003’, in D’Agata (ed.), *The Next American Essay* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2003), p. 436.

⁴ John D’Agata, ‘We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay’, in D’Agata (ed.), *We Might As Well Call It the Lyric Essay* (Geneva, NY: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 2014), p. 6.

⁵ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), pp. 128, 143.

⁶ Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 7, 25.

⁷ Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 140.

⁸ Sven Birkerts, 'For Cyberwriters, A Critical Link', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20 October 2006, p. 17.

⁹ Brian Dillon, 'Energy & Rue', *Frieze*, 151 (November-December 2012), pp. 125, 123.

¹⁰ Sarah Menkedick, 'Narrative of Fragments', *The New Inquiry*, available at <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/narrative-of-fragments/> (accessed 25 September 2015).

¹¹ Ian Patterson, 'The Method of Drifting', *London Review of Books*, 10 September 2015, p. 23.

¹² T.W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, 32 (Spring-Summer 1984), p. 164.

¹³ Carl H. Klaus, *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 35.

¹⁴ See, for example, John D'Agata, *Halls of Fame: Essays* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001); D'Agata (ed.), *The Next American Essay*.

¹⁵ David Shields, *How Literature Saved My Life* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013), p. 159.

¹⁶ Jenny Boully, 'The Body', in D'Agata (ed.), *The Next American Essay*, pp. 437-66.

¹⁷ Eula Biss, 'Prelude: The Box', in *The Balloonists* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2002), pp. 7-14.

¹⁸ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York: Picador, 2011), pp. 20, 7.

¹⁹ See John D'Agata (ed.), *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2009); and John D'Agata (ed.), *The Making of the American Essay* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016).

²⁰ Quoted in Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 29.

²¹ For a discussion of the origins of the discontinuous prose of what they call 'creative criticism' (Wayne Koestenbaum, Anne Carson, Geoff Dyer, Kevin Kopelson) in the Schlegelian fragment, see Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (eds), *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 12-13.

²² Phillip Lopate, *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* (New York: Free Press, 2013), pp. 122, 124.

²³ David Lazar, 'Occasional Desire: On the Essay and the Memoir', in Lazar (ed.), *Truth in Nonfiction* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008), p. 103.

²⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 194.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 94.

²⁶ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, [1974] 2011), p. 13.

²⁷ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 75, 94.

²⁸ Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 147.

²⁹ Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 202.

³⁰ Dillard, *Living by Fiction*, p. 28.

³¹ Jess Cotton, 'Interview with Maggie Nelson', *The White Review*, May 2015, available at <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-maggie-nelson/> (accessed 16 May 2016).

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- ³² Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2009), pp. 1-2.
- ³³ Ibid., pp. 26, 2.
- ³⁴ Ibid., pp. 74, 95.
- ³⁵ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House, 2015), pp. 102, 12.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 5.
- ³⁷ Molly Rose Quinn, 'Interview with Maggie Nelson', *The Atlas Review*, issue 4 (2015), available at <http://theatlasreview.com/interview-with-maggie-nelson/> (accessed 13 May 2016).
- ³⁸ Moira Donegan, 'Gay as in Happy: On Maggie Nelson', *n+1* 23 (Fall 2015), available at <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-23/reviews/gay-as-in-happy/> (accessed 16 May 2016).
- ³⁹ Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 209.
- ⁴⁰ De Olbadia, *The Essayistic Spirit*, p. 7.
- ⁴¹ See Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 1.
- ⁴² Jonathan Lethem, 'The Ecstasy of Influence', in *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), pp. 96, 112.
- ⁴³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005), pp. 18, 35. See also Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Less Presses du Réel, 2002).
- ⁴⁴ Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 143.
- ⁴⁵ Shields, *How Literature Saved My Life*, p. 131; Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 19.
- ⁴⁶ Shields, *How Literature Saved My Life*, p. 116.

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- ⁴⁷ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 5-6.
- ⁴⁸ David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (London: Profile, 2006), p. xii.
- ⁴⁹ John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), p. 16.
- ⁵⁰ David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), pp. 7-9.
- ⁵¹ Hal Foster, 'Exhibitionists', *London Review of Books*, 4 June 2015, p. 13.
- ⁵² John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), p. 92.
- ⁵³ Shields, *Reality Hunger*, pp. 92, 94.
- ⁵⁴ David Shields, *Remote: Reflections on Life in the Shadow of Celebrity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, [1996], 2003), pp. 15, 49, 51.
- ⁵⁵ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 252.
- ⁵⁶ Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 91; Don Paterson, *The Blind Eye: A Book of Late Advice* (London: Faber, 2007), p. 35.
- ⁵⁷ Don Paterson, 'The Aphorism is a Brief Waste of Time', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 2004.
- ⁵⁸ Paterson, *The Book of Shadows*, p. 198.
- ⁵⁹ Eliot Weinberger, *What I Heard About Iraq* (London: Verso, 2005).
- ⁶⁰ Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), pp. 30, 82, 85.

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- ⁶¹ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin, 2015), pp. 5, 7, 46.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ⁶³ Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 103.
- ⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: The Hogarth Press, [1938] 1991), pp. 111, 90, 12, 101, 126, 108.
- ⁶⁵ Judith Allen, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 6.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
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